

Aesthetics and emotions according to William James

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To my knowledge, there are two fundamental writings on emotions by William James. One is from 1884 and the other is from 1890. The first is an article published in the 9th volume of the magazine *Mind*, whereas the second is the Chapter XXV of the *Principles of Psychology*. The article tries to answer a simple question, which is also its title: «What is an emotion?», while the chapter entitled «Emotions» in the *Principles of Psychology* develops the core hypothesis of James' first writing on the matter. Both were written in reaction to the insufficiency of former neurophysiological researches, as these have ignored what he calls «the aesthetic sphere of the mind, its longings, its pleasures and pains, and its emotions»¹. They stress the physiological and embodied reality of our lives linking it to our aesthetic dimension and making us realize «more deeply than ever», through a description and an analysis of emotions, «how much our mental life is knit up with our corporeal frame, in the strictest sense of the term».² To say that emotions are physiological is not to deprive them from their importance or to state that what we live through them is nothing but an illusion deprived of any value. There is as much neurophysiological reality in our aesthetic approach to the world as there is a physiologic reality in our scientific statements about the neurophysiological dimension of our aesthetic experiences. And such reality does not deprive any of them from their sense or their value. «Our emotions must always be inwardly what they are, whatever be the physiological ground of their apparition. If they are deep, pure, worthy, spiritual facts on any conceivable theory of their physiological source, they remain no less deep, pure, spiritual, and worthy of regard on this present sensational theory. They carry their own inner measure of

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¹ James, W. 1884, p. 188.

² *Ibid.*, p. 201.

worth with them; and it is just as logical to use the present theory of the emotions for proving that sensational processes need not be vile and material, as to use their vileness and materiality as a proof that such a theory cannot be true»³.

Volitional and cognitive aspects of our existences, shows James, whether perceptual or mental, as long as they are related to real or virtual objects, are always intertwined with an emotional dimension, and our body's resonance, its changes are always called upon by any of the first. In other words, more neurologic, «the emotional brain-processes no only resemble the ordinary sensorial brain-processes, but in very truth are nothing but such processes variously combined»⁴. What is an emotion, then? «My theory [writes James] is that *the bodily changes* follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our *feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion*»⁵. Emotions are the feeling of the very subtle bodily motions that result from the excitement by objects. Each one of them, though typified, is always unique. «The various permutations and combinations of which these organic activities are susceptible make it abstractly possible that no shade of emotion, however slight, should be without a bodily reverberation as unique, when taken in its totality, as is the mental mood itself. The immense number of parts modified in each emotion is what makes it so difficult for us to reproduce in cold blood the total and integral expression of any one of them ».⁶

Consequently, there are no *feelings* of our body *accompanying* the perception of external or internal events, as these produce changes in our bodies, which are not emotional. Our organism «*may be called a sounding-board*, which every change of consciousness, however slight, may make reverberate»⁷. It is through our living body that we feel every change in our environment, as its perceptual content has within it an emotional response that composes simultaneously the immediate sense of what happens and of ourselves. «Our whole cubic capacity is sensibly alive; and each morsel of it contributes its pulsations of feeling, dim or sharp, pleasant, painful, or dubious, to that sense of personality that every one of us unfailingly carries with him»⁸. The absence of this bodily dynamic presence would be nothing but a rough sketch of a series of abstract perceptual qualities, whatever that might be. «Without the bodily states following on the perception, the latter would be purely cognitive in form, pale, colorless, destitute of emotional warmth»⁹, and if that might be the case for pure spirits, it is impossible for us. Emotions and instincts, excited by perception, are essential components of our life forms. They are also a phylogenetic inheritance allowing preserving them:

³ James, W. 1890, p. 453.

⁴ James, W. 1884, p. 188.

⁵ James, W. 1890, p. 449.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

«A purely disembodied human emotion is [therefore] a nonentity. I do not say – writes James – that it is a contradiction in the nature of things, or that pure spirits are necessarily condemned to cold intellectual lives; but I say that for us, emotion dissociated from all bodily feeling is inconceivable»¹⁰.

Emotions and instincts are both impulses, in James' terms, and they are inseparable.

«In speaking of the instincts it has been impossible to keep them separate from the emotional excitements which go with them. Objects of rage, love, fear, etc., not only prompt a man to outward deeds, but provoke characteristic alterations in his attitude and visage, and affect his breathing, circulation, and other organic functions in specific ways»¹¹. Still, there is an important difference between them that shows the specificity of emotions. Instincts are followed by external transformations, caused by action, while emotional changes do not lead necessarily to it. In other words, to put it like James: «When the outward deeds are inhibited, these latter *emotional expressions still remain*, and we read the anger in the face, though the blow may not be struck, and the fear betrays itself in voice and color, though one may suppress all other sign»¹².

Therefore, and even though instincts and emotions shade imperceptibly into each other: *it is true that «every object that excites an instinct excites an emotion as well [e]motions, however, fall short of instincts, in that the emotional reaction usually terminates in the subject's own body, whilst the instinctive reaction is apt to go farther and enter into practical relations with the exciting object»*¹³. If instincts can mould our practical actions, emotions give shape to our expression, and, in this simple sense, are our immediate understanding of the world. «Emotional reactions are often excited by objects with which we have no practical dealings. A ludicrous object, for example, or a beautiful object are not necessarily objects to which we *do* anything; we simply laugh, or stand in admiration, as the case may be»¹⁴. And James stresses the fact that we can use the word «object of emotion indifferently, to mean one which is physically present or one which is merely thought of»¹⁵. That, of course, is of most importance for representational art forms.

The basic, or should we say, the core element of expression, its self evident sense, is our body's emotional *response* to what happens, not necessarily in the outer world. «The class of emotional [reactions], is thus rather larger than that of instinctive impulses, commonly so called. Its stimuli are more numerous, and its expressions are more internal and delicate, and often less practical»¹⁶.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.452.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 442.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Nevertheless, writes James, «the physiological plan and essence of the two classes of impulse, however, is the same»¹⁷. This impulsive reaction is an evaluation. Not only are emotions, like instincts, directional, but *they also immediately value* what happens, that is to say, they give a living sense to their object, as they are rooted in primitive forms of affirmation and negation, acceptance or refusal, that allow the perpetuation of a living form. «To the animal which obeys it, says James, every impulse [...] shines with its own sufficient light, and seems at the moment the only eternally right and proper thing to do. It is done for its own sake exclusively»¹⁸. And the same goes with man, who «possesses all the impulses that [other animals] have, and a great many more besides»¹⁹. What might these evaluative components of emotions be, if they are the very first qualitative ways of being in the world? James extended hypothesis concerning emotions is that any of them, from the coarser, to the subtler, that is to say «the moral, intellectual and aesthetic feelings»²⁰ follow upon the bodily affective expression. Therefore, not only can we recognize «coarser emotions such as grief, fear and rage, [as having] a strong organic reverberation», but we can also say that «rapture, love, ambition, indignation, and pride, considered as feelings, are fruits of the same soil with the grossest bodily sensations of pleasure and of pain».²¹

James gives some examples of what he calls emotions by analogy that show how impulsive reactions based on pleasure or displeasure are perpetuated in more complex social valuation forms, be they moral, aesthetic or simply logical. They also cast some light in the origin of values and on the way social realities, our being in the world with others, are permanently intertwined with emotional and instinctive reactions. «The ordinary gesture of negation — among us, says James, moving the head about its axis from side to side — is a reaction originally used by babies to keep disagreeable from getting into their mouth, and may be observed in perfection in any nursery. *It is now evoked where the stimulus is only an unwelcome idea*. Similarly the nod forward in affirmation is after the analogy of taking food into the mouth»²². Another example of what he calls emotions by analogy shows

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 468.

²¹ James, W. 1884, p. 201.

²² James, W. 1890, p. 481. It is interesting to notice that we find a similar approach to the genesis (in this case, an ontogenesis conditioned by phylogenesis) of affirmation and negation in one of Freud's "epistemological" texts. The Darwinian inheritance to which James makes explicit references, is also present in Freud's text in a less evident way, as the physiological aspects of affectivity and emotion cease to be the central concern of his research by the end of the XIX century, although his more important hypothesis on these points are not invalidated by his further research, and remain even as a tacit and unquestioned ground for its development. In 1925's 'The negation' (Freud, S. 1925), the psychoanalyst establishes a line of continuity between *oral drives* and logical statements, through which we value the represented objects. The logical forms of predication ('O is P' or 'S is not P') take the form 'there is an O that is P' or 'there is not an O that is P', in which stating affirmatively is to *accept* the existence of an OP (a given object 'O' that has the

«the connection of the expression of *moral or social disdain or dislike*, especially in women, with movements having a perfectly definite original olfactory function, is too obvious for comment»²³.

Of course, the fact that emotions are intertwined with any of our bodily-living activities has a great importance to our appreciation of the moral and aesthetic aspects of our existence, as both of them are therefore rooted in the way we feel our body and in its qualitative changes towards external objects. Beauty and morality themselves can express a physiological reality of pleasure or displeasure. To determine to what point affective responses are or are not always present in our aesthetic or moral experiences, James establishes a difference between the pure and simple aesthetic emotions and secondary pleasures that are a repercussion of other sensations consequently aroused by the first. «We must [...] insist that aesthetic emotion, *pure and simple*, the pleasure given us by certain lines and masses, and combinations of colors and sounds, is an absolutely sensational experience, an optical or auricular feeling *that is primary*»²⁴. This kind of pleasure

propriety 'P') and stating negatively is to *reject* its existence, for *acceptance* and *refusal* are immediate ways of valuing OP as being *good* or *bad*. Good object are the ones that the child wants to *keep in her*, bad objects the ones she *moves aside*. The *movements of the head*, upon which James calls our attention, seem to be the result of these two basic drives of affirming or denying rooted in the oral drives. Following the vicissitudes (or maybe the metaphors, in what concerns the talking mammals that we are) of these drives and their displacement from a primitive object to more complex forms of reality, we can understand that objects are *accepted* when they *arouse pleasure* (and are said "good") and they are rejected when they arouse displeasure (and are said to be "bad"). The original «pleasure-I» wishes to introject everything that is good and to reject out of him everything that is bad. Oral drives remain predominant, and valuation remains a pure expression of them, as long as judgment does not become independent from pleasure, that is to say, as long as "bad" objects cannot be accepted and assimilated (as they remain *alien* to the I). In other words, as long as emotional and affective responses linked with a pleasure principle, continue to be the main force that moulds perception and representation... and as long as objects are not recognized *as being* independently of the emotional experience we have of them. But even after the 'I' has acquired an independence and a "distance" from the objects (and can therefore recognize the difference between internal representations and external objects that does not depend upon the difference between pleasant and non-pleasant, good or bad), an affective and emotional remain will always be attached to the second, simply because the cognitive activity that links the 'I' and the real world, as it is rooted in the living drives of the body, stimulate the traces of past perceptions and of objects, deeply charged with the primitive forms of acceptance or of rejection that anchored their experience in the 'pleasure-I'! It goes without saying that the primitive forms of love and hate inherent to this motions of acceptance and of rejection are deeply present in the constitution of the relational net of an individual as they shape its "objectal" world, immediately valuing as good or bad the (existence of) others. Pleasure or displeasure will therefore be, also in Freudian terms, original forms of more complex ethical valuation.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 482.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 468.

comes from the form itself, as it is perceived and, «to this simple primary and immediate pleasure in certain pure sensations and harmonious combinations of them, *there may*, it is true, be *added* secondary pleasures». ²⁵ What are those pleasures, and in what sense do they interfere in our experience of beauty? The first seem to be related to the simple form of the objects that arouse them. Its content form, to say so, the way it presents itself. «Concords of sounds, of colors, of lines, logical consistencies, teleological fitnesses, affect us with a pleasure that seems ingrained in the very form of the representation itself, and to borrow nothing from any reverberation surging up from the parts below the brain». ²⁶ In this sense, «a mathematical demonstration may be as 'pretty,' and an act of justice as 'neat,' as a drawing or a tune, although the prettiness and neatness seem to have nothing to do with sensation» ²⁷. On the other hand, «secondary emotions themselves, writes James, are assuredly for the most part constituted of other incoming sensations aroused by the diffusive wave of reflex effects which the beautiful object sets up. A glow, a pang in the breast, a shudder, a fullness of the breathing, a flutter of the heart, a shiver down the back, a moistening of the eyes, a stirring in the hypogastrium, and a thousand unnamable symptoms besides, may be felt *the moment the beauty excites us*» ²⁸.

James' distinction between the two sorts of pleasures takes as example two different artistic and somehow antagonistic trends: classicism and romanticism. This difference allows us to grasp also what emotions can be in terms of reverberation of our being, including its temporal dimension. «Classicism and romanticism have their battles over this point. Complex suggestiveness, the awakening of vistas of memory and association, and the stirring of our flesh with picturesque mystery and gloom, make a work of art *romantic*». ²⁹ On the contrary «the classic taste brands these effects as coarse and tawdry, and prefers the naked beauty of the optical and auditory sensations, unadorned with frippery or foliage. To the romantic mind, [...] *the immediate beauty* of these sensations seems dry and thin. I am of course not discussing which view is right, but only showing that the discrimination between the primary feeling of beauty, as a *pure incoming sensible quality*, and the secondary emotions which are grafted thereupon, is one that must be made» ³⁰. A concrete illustration of what can be the expression of the emotional reverberations produced in a subject by a simple perceptual experience, in a kind of romantic taste, is given by James in the footnote 22 of the chapter on emotions of his *Principles of Psychology*. «A flavor may fairly shake us by the ghosts of 'banquet halls deserted,' which it suddenly calls up; or a smell may make us feel almost sick with the waft it brings over our memory of 'gardens that are ruins, and pleasure-houses that are dust.' "In the Pyrenees," says M. Guyau, "after a summer-day's tramp carried to the extreme of fatigue, I met a shepherd

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 468.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 468.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 470.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 470.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 470

and asked him for some milk. He went to fetch from his hut, under which a brook ran, a jar of milk plunged in the water and kept at a coldness which was almost icy. In drinking this fresh milk *into which all the mountain had put its perfume*, and of which each savory swallow seemed to give new life, I certainly experienced a series of feelings which the word *agreeable* is insufficient to designate. It was like a pastoral symphony, apprehended by the taste instead of by the ear".³¹

Despite the difference that can be made, the two kinds of pleasures seem to be permanently intertwined. If it is true that «the more *classic* one's taste is, [...] the less relatively important are the secondary pleasures felt to be in comparison with those of the primary sensation as it comes in»³², it does not mean the secondary pleasures are absent. Any emotion has a bodily reverberation. Primary and secondary emotions hardly exist without each other, and we shall not make confusion between the familiarity of aesthetic emotions that blunts them, and their non-existence. The surprising effects, the wonder and curiosity frequently aroused by aesthetic experiences, might be inferior for those that are used to them, but that does not mean there is a mere intellectual aesthetic enjoyment of the works of art independent of shivering emotions. It comes from a long frequentation of art forms and, by means of it, of these surprising emotions, called secondary pleasures. «[W]here long familiarity with a certain class of effects, even aesthetic ones, has blunted mere emotional excitability as much as it has sharpened taste and judgment, we do get the intellectual emotion, if such it can be called, pure and undefiled»³³. These refined emotions, that appear to be purely intellectual, come from what most people feel at first when surprised by the effects of aesthetic experiences. «In the practical enjoyment of works of art by the masses of mankind these secondary pleasures play a great part»³⁴. What is true of aesthetic emotions, in these matters, is also the case for moral ones. «These symptoms also result when we are excited by moral perceptions, as of pathos, magnanimity, or courage. The voice breaks and the sob rises in the struggling chest, or the nostril dilates and the fingers tighten, whilst the heart beats, etc., etc»³⁵.

Is it true, then, that, if aesthetic or moral values are to have any sense, they must express or be expressible in terms of the changes they bring to our embodied existences, that is to say, to our emotional being-in-the world? Is it true that they can not just be rational, or intellectual? «In all cases of intellectual or moral rapture we find that, unless there be coupled a bodily reverberation of some kind with the mere thought of the object and cognition of its quality [...] our state of mind can hardly be called emotional at all. It is in fact a mere intellectual perception of how certain things are to be called - *neat, right, witty, generous, and the like*. Such a judicial state of mind as this is to be classed among *awarenesses of*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 469.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 468.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 457.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

truth; it is a *cognitive* act. [But James points out that:] *As a matter of fact, however, the moral and intellectual cognitions hardly ever do exist thus unaccompanied*³⁶. We laugh at the neatness of a demonstration or witticism, we thrill at a case of justice, we tingle at the act of magnanimity. «The bodily sounding-board is at work [in each of these cases], as careful introspection will show, far more than we usually suppose». Emotions seem therefore to be the unsurpassable consequence of our affected openness to the world and of the way we are surprised from within by what happens in it, may that be “intellectual or cognitive”. «Yes! In every art, in every science, there is the keen perception of certain relations being *right* or not, and there is the *emotional flush and thrill consequent thereupon*»³⁷.

Art forms, says James, have a tremendous importance in revealing us the emotional responses engaged in our perception of the world. Through art, we are placed in the surprising evidence of the affective roots of our relations to inner and outer realities and aesthetic experiences make us understand that particular perceptions and events do produce wide-spread bodily effects by a sort of immediate physical influence. «In listening to poetry, drama, or heroic narrative we are often surprised at the cutaneous shiver which like a sudden wave flows over us, and at the heart-swelling and the lachrymal effusion that unexpectedly catch us at intervals. In listening to music the same is even more strikingly true».³⁸ And, of course, this is even truer as art expresses the (emotional) life of others. If the descriptions of emotions we find in psychology books are terribly tedious, says James, so much that he would rather read verbal descriptions of the shapes of the rocks on a New Hampshire farm as toil through them again»³⁹, art forms, like literature, for instance, give us an access to the subtle variety of feelings and to our capacity of understanding them. Despite individual differences in terms of emotional response to events, we should be able to understand the emotions of others, through the changes they bring to our body. «As emotions are described in novels, says James, they interest us, for we *are made to share them*. We have grown acquainted with the concrete objects and emergencies which call them forth, and any knowing touch of introspection which may grace the page *meets with a quick and feeling response*».⁴⁰ It seems, therefore, difficult to state convincingly any form of indifference or of profound incomprehension between people. Despite differences, their emotional structure lies upon the same simple forms of pleasure and pain expressions that each one's own life shares and declines in its single way. The emotional feeling of ourselves is clarified by the feeling of others, and the *feeling of others, for each one of us, is clarified by the emotional feeling of oneself*.

Through their emotional reverberation, art works and aesthetic experiences show us the empathetic and inter-subjective dimension of our emotional life allowing us

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 470-471.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 472.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 457.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 448.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

to recognize and to discover each other as emotional living beings. Aesthetics and emotions have therefore a deep moral and political role, and not only do they allow us to feel that others feel pleasure or displeasure, but their virtual and imaginary dimension make possible a transformation of the instinctual reactions of a subject, having therefore the capacity to change his form of life and the values that express it. In this sense, the emotional compounds of aesthetic emotions have a greater role than reason in the shaping of human action and in its moral education. Aristotle, Schiller and Freud among many others, each one in his own way, had already told us that artistic emotions have a role in the metamorphosis of human passions and in the increasing of human freedom. James does not talk about it directly in his psychological writings on emotions, but his characterization of instincts and impulses allow us to make this final statement. «Man has a far greater variety of *impulses* than any lower animal; and any one of these impulses, taken in itself, is as 'blind' as the lowest instinct can be; but, owing to man's memory, power of reflection, and power of inference, they come each one to be felt by him, after he has once yielded to them and experienced their results, in connection with a *foresight* of those results».⁴¹ Experience of emotions and inference of results can transform the associative chains that go from excitement to action by giving us this foresight. The emotions aroused by virtual objects, such as artistic ones, have the power to create a memory of what can be, before it has actually taken place, or before it happens again. «As with instincts, so with emotions, the mere *memory* or *imagination* of the object may suffice to liberate the excitement».⁴² What happens in terms of emotions can therefore change the impulsive structure of our behavior, making us understand the consequences of our possible actions. «Some expectation of consequences must in every case like this be aroused; and this expectation, according as it is that of something desired or of something disliked, must necessarily either reinforce or inhibit the mere impulse».⁴³ There is no reasoning about right or wrong that can be indifferent to an emotional experience, even imaginary, about our values or effects of our actions as they are inseparable from our bodily reality. «Reason, *per se*, can inhibit no impulses; the only thing that can neutralize an impulse is an impulse the other way. Reason may, however, make an *inference which will excite the imagination so as to set loose the impulse the other way*; and thus, though the animal richest in reason might be also the animal richest in instinctive impulses too, he would never seem the *fatal automaton* which a, *merely* instinctive animal would be».⁴⁴

I would like to end up quoting an example that allows us to cease the importance of the emotional understanding of living expressivity. All along our reading of some of James' arguments concerning emotions we have noticed that, aesthetic emotions, as grounded in the feelings of pleasure or pain, do not separate human from other living beings, but rather give them an empathetic power that goes far beyond the anthropic world and allow us to realize that we share the same

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 442-443.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 393.

expressive life with any living being. It is this profound sympathy for the living, emotionally experienced, that can transform our way of life and change our values.

«If a boy sees a fat hopping-toad, he probably has incontinently an impulse (especially if with other boys) to smash the creature with a stone, which impulse we may suppose him blindly to obey. But something in the expression of the dying toad's clasped hands suggests the meanness of the act, or reminds him of sayings he has heard about the sufferings of animals being like his own; so that, when next he is tempted by a toad, an idea arises which, far from spurring him again to the torment, prompts kindly actions, and may even make him the toad's champion against less reflecting boys».⁴⁵

References

- James, W. 1884. « What is Emotion? », in *Mind*, 9, pp. 188-205.
- James, W. 1890. *Principles of Psychology*, volume 2, (1950), Dover Publications.
- Freud, S. 1925. 'Negation', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, volume XIX (1923-1925), pp. 233-240.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 390.